



OFFICE OF VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION TUITION ASSISTANCE POLICY EFFECTIVE JANUARY 2008

Introduction

The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation has established the following Tuition Assistance Policy consistent with the Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD) as outlined in the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1998 and the state tuition guidelines obtained from the Office of Employee and Organizational Development (OEOD). All tuition assistance is based on availability of funds.

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To: All OVR Staff

From: Susie Edwards
HRD Program Administrator

Re: Tuition Assistance

Date: March 4, 2008

Over the past several months we have been asked as an agency to prepare for difficult decisions based on budgetary constraints. Due to budget shortfalls being experienced at all levels of state government it has been necessary to review policies regarding tuition assistance. The following items are highlighted points with the complete requirements outlined in the 2008 Tuition Assistance Policy. As of this memo the following policies are in place:

- As of summer 2008 tuition assistance for a degree program is only available for full-time Office of Vocational Rehabilitation employees that are required to achieve educational standards mandated by Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD). Currently this includes vocational rehabilitation counselors, case managers, field administrators and positions that are considered “paraprofessionals” and are required to hold certifications in their field of expertise.
- Only CSPD appropriate programs will be approved such as Master of Rehabilitation Counseling programs, Master of Counseling programs or other programs with counseling as the primary focus.
- Employees must complete probation prior to enrolling in an educational program. Beyond the probation, supervisor discretion will determine employee readiness to enter an educational program.
- Course-by-course approvals are still available based on strong justification that the course requested is to expand the skills of an employee in the position for which they are currently employed.
- All tuition assistance forms filed for spring 2008 will be honored according to the old policy.

The process for requesting tuition assistance has not changed. Please make sure that your educational intentions are outlined in a Career Development Plan, complete a tuition assistance request form each semester with the appropriate signatures and send the completed form to the HRD Program Administrator for final approval. The form will be filed with the school of choice so that third party payment can be processed accordingly.

Although these policy changes are difficult, please note that every effort will be made to upgrade available tuition assistance as funding allows.

Feel free to contact me if you have any questions regarding this matter.

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Authority

The authority for the Educational Assistance program for employees of the Commonwealth of Kentucky is KRS 164.357, which created the Governmental Services Center and provided for its duties and responsibilities. Executive Order 2004-728 abolished the Governmental Services Center and established the Office of Government Training (OGT). OGT is responsible for issuing, administering, and interpreting this policy. (The OEOD Formal Name Change has not yet taken place.)

Sources of Funds

The OVR tuition policy is based on current state allowances as well as funding availability and is subject to change.

Payment of Funds and Educational Sources

Educational assistance provides for the payment of funds directly to the educational institution by the agency after the employee has received prior approval for the course from the agency's Appointing Authority or designee.

Employees Eligible for Tuition Assistance

Permanent full-time Office of Vocational Rehabilitation employees required to achieve educational standards mandated by Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD). Currently this includes vocational rehabilitation counselors, case managers, field administrators and positions that are considered "paraprofessionals" and are required to hold a degree leading to a specific certification in their field of expertise.

Approved Degree Programs and Courses

Only CSPD appropriate programs will be approved. This includes Master of Rehabilitation Counseling programs, Master of Counseling programs or other programs with counseling as the primary focus or programs specific to paraprofessionals required to meet CSPD in their field of expertise.

- **Counselors, Field Managers or Case Managers, prior to entering a non-MRC program individuals must successfully complete a graduate course in "Medical, Psychosocial and Cultural Aspects of Disabilities" at an approved university.

Requests for academic courses specific to the development of current job functions for full-time employees will be reviewed on a course-by-course basis. Eligible courses are identified on the *2008 Office of Vocational Rehabilitation Degree Programs and Acceptable Course Content* and are limited to no more than 5 hours per semester unless otherwise approved through Tuition Assistance Exception as outlined in this policy.

Amount of Tuition Assistance and Allowable Courses Per Session

Tuition assistance is permitted at 100% tuition cost. (See page 4 and 5 for a complete list of "Allowable" and "Non-Allowable" expenditures.)

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Allowable courses per session are as follows:

- Eligible employees in an approved master's degree program may participate as a **full or part-time** student with 100% tuition assistance provided.
- Course-by-course approvals are limited to 5 semester hours or less per semester unless justified and approved as a "Tuition Assistance Exception" as outlined in this policy.
- Please review pages 4 and 5 for a complete list of "Allowable" and "Non-Allowable" expenditures

All employees **must** apply for any scholarships that are available and those will be applied prior to agency providing final payment. The agency does not calculate eligibility for loans into the request for tuition assistance.

Approved Colleges and Universities

Educational assistance may be granted to pay for course in which college credit is earned, offered by: public or private degree granting postsecondary education institutions, on-line schools, secondary schools and Kentucky Virtual Campus.

The dollar amount per credit hour approved for educational assistance at a private college or university or an out-of-state college or university shall be limited to the current tuition cost at the four (4) year state university (offering the same or a comparable degree) located nearest the employee's county of employment.

**** Auburn University** - Qualified employees (counselors or field branch manager) may participate in the Auburn MRC Program under the CSPD grant for the institution. Out-of-state travel is required for this program and employees are responsible for submitting the necessary paperwork for approval to travel to Auburn. The paperwork must be submitted in the timeframe as required by the Education Cabinet and approval must be received prior to the travel date or the employee will not be covered under worker's compensation and must take annual leave in order to attend the session.

Kentucky State University Requirement

Employees who live in or whose work station is in Franklin County or an adjoining county will receive educational assistance only for courses at Kentucky State University (KSU) unless the course is not available or offered there. Additionally, correspondence courses and on-line courses may be approved for employees who live in, or whose workstation is in Franklin County only when comparable course of in-class instruction is not available at Kentucky State University. This policy is based on Kentucky's Higher Education Desegregation Plan in response to the U.S. Office of Civil Rights Letter of January 15, 1981, Final Revision January 1982. This procedure shall be applied uniformly unless the Executive Director of the Office of Employee and Organizational

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Development waives the requirement for a particular course subject to these policies.

Work Time Allowances/Work Schedule

Employees will continue to work on a full-time basis, but may use flexible work schedules and annual/compensatory leave to accommodate participation in the tuition assistance program provided it does not adversely impact services or employee job performance.

Class assignments that can be incorporated into required work duties (i.e. practicum activities, internship activities) may be completed during working hours.

Compensatory Time

Compensatory time will not be approved for course work or course hours.

Educational Leave Policy

Special leave of absence may be granted, with or without pay, for up to 24 months, with the approval of the appointing authority and the Secretary of Personnel. If granted leave shall be either with pay (if the employee contractually agrees to a service commitment) or without pay.

A special leave of absence may be used to attend college, university, or business school, or to receive training in work-related subjects when it is of tangible benefit to the state. Employees will not accumulate annual/compensatory leave or sick leave while on special leave with pay. If leave is without pay, employees must make arrangements through the payroll officer to continue health and life insurance. Employees must pay the total premiums.

Allowable Expenditures

- Educational Institution Application and/or Registration Fee – One time only and must be paid through invoice process. Do not use the procard for this expenditure.
- Tuition
- Fees
- Graduate Records Exam (GRE) (see below)
 - Available to employees who meet tuition assistance eligibility

Non-Allowable Expenditures

- Late registration
- Materials or course supplies
- Books
- Withdrawal fees or non-recoverable tuition based on employee dropping course – reimbursement to the agency is required
- Parking or transportation
- Records or transcripts

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- Remedial Courses
- Specific courses taken previously by the employee without prior approval for tuition assistance.
- Courses being repeated

GRE

The agency will pay for an employee to take for the GRE (one time only) if they meet the necessary requirements for tuition assistance eligibility. The cost of the GRE must be paid by procard with appropriate documentation to substantiate the purchase (receipt). The Office recognizes that the administration of examinations may take place during the week or on the weekend and expects that employees will use flex schedules and/or leave time to accommodate the testing requirements. Travel expense is not provided.

Expectations

Expectations for maintaining satisfactory job performance and meeting job expectations such as positive employment outcomes (PEO) take precedence. If a supervisor notes a decrease in job performance and coaching mechanisms do not adequately address the issue, it may be necessary for the employee to withdraw from the program or reduce the course load until job performance has improved.

Timelines for Meeting CSPD

Employees required to meet CSPD standards such as those carrying a caseload and field branch managers are expected to achieve the standard of "Qualified Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor" which Kentucky has defined as educationally qualified to sit for the Certified Rehabilitation Counselor designation. The required degree is to be achieved within five (5) years from the date of employment.

Use of State Equipment

Employees are expected to access available equipment outside of the Office in order to pursue educational goals.

Employee Obligation

All employees receiving assistance under these guidelines are subject to a two (2) year work commitment to the Office upon completion of the degree.

The signed Tuition Assistance Form indicates authorization for the Office to withhold future educational assistance monies or to recover all or part of any assistance granted if:

- The employee's tuition assistance form contains any material falsification; or,

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- The employee fails to provide the Office, within thirty (30) working days of scheduled completion of the course, a student evaluation for each course taken and an official grade report with a satisfactory grade in the course for which the educational assistance was authorized. An employee must earn a grade of "B" or better in graduate studies to be considered satisfactory. A grade of "I" or "S" will result in the withholding of funds until the class is satisfactorily completed unless the HRD Administrator determines that the incomplete resulted from circumstances beyond the employee's control. Failing a course will result in the withholding of tuition assistance and other expenditures until the employee has paid for and satisfactorily completed an equal number of course hours; or,
- The employee is voluntarily terminated or dismissed after a course is completed or during a course and before the employee's two (2) year employment requirement is met. This policy shall not apply to employees who do not meet the service requirements because of layoffs, reductions in work force, or actions resulting from internal mobility programs; or,
- The employee drops the course; or,
- The employee receives duplicate payment for the same course from any other sources, i.e. scholarships, veteran's educational payments, etc

Obligation of the Supervisor

It is the supervisor's responsibility to review the Office's career development policy with the employee and assist in the development of the personal career development plan. Additionally, supervisors are responsible for assuring that the following criteria are met prior to approval for employees to enter or continue in training required to meet CSPD requirements:

- The employee must be satisfactorily completing all job duties;
- The employee must have a current Personal Career Development Plan with specific career development goals that have been reviewed and approved by the employee's supervisor.

The supervisor's signature on the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation Tuition Assistance Form verifies that the employee's obligations have been met and that the supervisor fully supports the employee's participation in the training.

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Equal Opportunity

Selection for participation in training shall be on an equal opportunity basis. No employee shall be prohibited from participating in training courses because of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, disability, age, or veteran status.

Exception Policy

Degree program exceptions will not be provided.

Course-by-course exceptions for more than 5 hours per semester will require strong justification by the employee and employee's supervisor. The justification shall include benefits and/or consequences if the exception is not granted. The justification for the request and a completed tuition assistance form outlining the courses requested must be made in writing at least 30 days prior to the beginning of the semester for which the request is being submitted. The forms must be submitted to the assistant director of record for approval and if approved forwarded to the division director. The Division Director along with the Executive Director will review the request and current budget constraints to make a determination regarding the request. The HRD Program Administrator will provide input as needed in the decision making process and will notify the employee and supervisor in writing regarding the decision.

Required Forms

Forms are available on the Intranet.

- OVR Tuition Assistance Form (all employees seeking tuition assistance must file this form at least 30 days prior to the beginning of courses)
- Course Evaluation Form (required for all employees and should be filed at the end of each course along with a copy of the final grade report)

Procedures for Application and Approval

1. Complete the Office Tuition Assistance Form including supervisor and 2nd line supervisor approval and submit to the Assistant Director of record. The Assistant Director will sign and return to the HRD Program Administrator for processing with the college or university.
2. Upon approval the applicant will receive a copy of the signed Tuition Assistance Form and shall complete the appropriate application processes for the identified college or university.
3. The Office will provide the educational institution with a copy of the Tuition Assistance Form as authorization for payment of tuition fees.

It is imperative that the Tuition Assistance Form be completed and received by the HRD Program Administrator no later than one month prior to the beginning of classes.